

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell, May 1871, with transcript

Copy of a letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his father. 2 Bulfinch Place, Boston, Thursday, May 1871 ? Dear Papa:

As this letter talks “shop” I address it to Papa. I enclose a letter for “Pamaca” also.

I cannot manage to write regularly so many things come in the way. I shall send you on Sunday a report for May the 1st of the condition of the whole school as regards the Elementary Sounds of Speech — which chart please return. I will not want it for a few days. But I shall require it by and bye. This Chart shows that (taking the whole school) about 50 per cent of the sounds were defective and it also exhibits to the eye the class of sounds that were most defective. For instance — about 90 per cent of the pupils failed to give the hissing sound s correctly. A very large proportion could not give [???] (not having the tongue back) and in consequence failed in [???]. I have drawn up from this chart a list of the English sounds in the order of difficulty — which will no doubt be useful in showing what sounds we may try to obtain first with the greatest chance of success. As I have left my chart at the school I cannot give you this list just now — I remember however that the sounds which all gave were [???], [???], [???], [???] About 95 per cent could give [???] 90 per cent [???] Nearly the same proportion [???] Then came [???] The difficulty with [???] was nasality. Those pupils I have been devoting particular attention to are now all nearly perfect in the elements . On the 1st of May the teachers were 2 sufficiently advanced to assist in the work, and the pupils had been so drilled in the symbols that they understood them. On the 1st of May then we commenced the systematic instruction of the whole school in Articulation. I have been hard at work perfecting the details — and have been so successful that everything goes on like clock-work . First there are 5 pupils I pay particular attention to. I take 4 of them between 9 and 11. 2 Half-an-hour each, 2 quarter each. The

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fifth I take after school hours and i n the presence of all the teacher s for $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour. This (Miss Flagg) is my e locutionary pupil. Her voice is fast becoming p erfectly natural . By the constant use of the tube, and reading in advance of her I find that she is beginning unconsciously to imitate my inflections — so I am not devoting much time to them in the meantime. We have entered upon the theory of emphasis and she seems to understand thoroughly. She read after me “Bruce and the Spider” to-day and did it very well. Her style of speaking is now no longer syllabic but flowing . This has been achieved by imitation. Her ear is not yet sufficiently trained to carry on a conversation without the help of her eye. If I say to her quickly “Do you understand what I say” — it conveys no meaning to her — it is a confused mass. I therefore say first “Do — you — understand — what — I — say” — this she gathers the sense of and I then repeat it quickly to accustom her ear to it as a whole. I find already a marked improvement in her hearing or rather in her appreciation of what she hears.

From 10 to 10:30 we have an Articulation Class. The w hole 3 school is divided into 5 classes one for each teacher. I take the most advanced — as to the others I write out on a piece of paper what is to be done with each class. For instance — to-day we had 3 “special classes”. By my chart I put together all the pupils who could pronounce [???] in one class — those who did [???] in another — and those who could pronounce both [???] and [???] into a third. The object was to perfect these vowels so that in a day or two I may lead to [???] and [???]. Take the class for [???]. By a peculiar arrangement which I have called “Progressive Indicators” I can see at a glance what other sounds these particular pupils have in common. Suppose [???] — I note these sounds on a slip of paper say with Miss Fuller's name. Miss Fuller takes the paper. At 10 o'clock she collects together the pupils whose names are on the paper and exercises them upon [???] and the other sounds — singly and in combination — long syllables, short ditto. Loud, soft etc., etc. The same with the other special classes . All those who could pronounce neither [???] nor [???] were arranged in two classes and practiced on the sounds they had in common . Paying special attention to the development of accent thus:— [???] [???] [???] etc. The

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idea I have tried to work out is this. That each pupil in the school shall have class exercise on the sounds he can do perfectly and individual attention on the sounds he is defective in every day.

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The work in the school progresses most satisfactorily. It has been suggested to have a Public Exhibition of the school before I leave. In this event would you care to be present and make some remarks?!!

I have learned some most important lessons from my adult class. I opened on the 1st of May with 7 pupils. They all appreciated at once the symbols of Visible Speech. We completed the Consonant Scheme f irst day and they all gave [???] and [???] and [???] and [???] at once. I then showed them that they could already say the words Papa -Mama, far ([???]) and map ([???]). They accordingly went home in high glee.

Next day we went through the vowel scheme with as great success as before — and then I made a mistake .

In order to encourage them I wished to t each them some new sounds and a few more simple words. We therefore tried [???] [???] [???] etc., and I made a most i gnominious failure ! They understood perfectly w hat to do but they had no power to do it. Their tongues went into all sorts of positions e xcept the right one — and their voices were the most lamentable s queaks imaginable. The result was that though we managed to get [???] and [???] they went home with long faces evidently d iscouraged . I myself was thoroughly disheartened — and felt as if I were entering upon a hopeless task. However I resolved not a gain to attempt t to t each h sounds, but just to take whatever “outlandish” sounds they happened to make, and try to l ead from them to English sounds. That is — I resolved not to teach but to develop .

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Next day only three out of the seven made their appearance. A new one joined the class and my number has been four ever since. My new plan as been so successful that they can all give 16 English elements perfectly , and one can give 22!! Besides this I have succeeded in producing natural voices by popping down on the board the sign ([??]) whenever they happened to give a low pitch, and "[??]" whenever they gave a high. Mr. Packard a gentleman about 40 years of age can now give [??] high pitch (a squeak) [??] low pitch and [??] an intermediate pitch. By placing these upon the board this way and making a line from one to another — he has caught the idea of inflection and can glide from one pitch to another. As an illustration of my new plan of proceeding. I was explaining to Mr. Goldsmith the meaning of the symbols [??] — and I told him that voice was nothing more than the throat shaking and that it was this shaking that he felt when he placed his hand upon my throat. Mr. Packard saw what I told Mr. Goldsmith and when I spoke of the "shaking" he made the sound [??]. I immediately place the symbols on the board — made him do the sound half-a-dozen times and d escribe by sign s what he was doing. In a few second he was led from [??] to [??] and from that to [??] and [??]. From [??] he gave next day [??] [??] [??] and from [??] he produced [??] and [??] and the last time we met he gave from [??] [??] [??] [??] [??] p erfectly . I cannot get [??] or any point-tongue letter from any of them by imitation. Or rather I am afraid to make the attempt as often as I should for fear of disheartening them. Can 6 you suggest any way of forcing it? Mr. Packard gave one day accidentally "[??]". I gave him the symbol and we practised it about a dozen times, but he has forgotten it again.

Last time we met I practised them on long vowels (all can now give [??] and [??]). Of course in my descriptions I use either signs or the black-board, or the manual alphabet (I can now use the one-handed alphabet — and I have been taught enough of the sign-language to make use of the knowledge). Hence I make no noise myself.

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It so happened last night that in one of the offices upstairs — a gentleman had remained late in order to do up some back-work. Suddenly a discordant noise strikes his ear [???] [???] [???]

He listens — can't make it out at all — a noise like a lot of wild beasts. It stops — and he goes on with his work. (I am giving some explanation to the class, of course noiselessly) — suddenly a solitary shriek is heard (I really can't dignify it by any other name) — this was Mr. Packard trying to say [???] with a high pitch!!! The gentleman started up and hurried down stairs to see what was wrong — but ore he got half way down he was greeted by such a discordant volley of [???] and [???] that he was really frightened. I then heard a tremulous voice exclaiming, “Is there anything wrong down there”? I took no notice and the class responded [???] [???]. The man was silent for some time. I thought he had gone away. I had varied the exercise in order to 7 get accent so we had [???] [???] [???] [???] and [???] [???] [???] [???].

Again the voice came “Hoy — I say what's wrong.” Answer [???]. At last a most extraordinary sound from Mr. Packard (intended for [???] with a high pitch) brought forth the exclamation “Janitor — Janitor for God's sake come here” — and I had to leave the class to explain. The man was so frightened that he bolted up stairs when I made my appearance — and put a safe distance between us before he stopped!

Your affectionate son, Aleck.